

The Architecture of Alienation in Modern History

Marx spent most of his life on analysis of the capitalist mode of production. He did so, of course, to understand it in such a way that he could help put an end to it.

ERIC WOLF, *EUROPE AND THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY*, 1997

Human beings by nature are social, creative, and capable of actual real world experience. Furthermore, human beings actively transform the wider material (or real, empirically knowable) world because they are creative. That creativity is intimately connected with human social relations that are situated and actualized within a real material world—people approach the material world that exists before them and around them as social beings who seek to transform that material world to meet human ends. Thus, people make things from the materials of the world within which they are situated. At the same time, sociality is not a simple or even transparent phenomenon. Socialities among human beings take on many different forms across human history, and thus the ways by which humans transform the wider world and its elements (such as stones, plants, earth, air, water, and beings outside the human species) are historically contingent. It is at this important intersection of human creativity, the wider material world, and human socialities that alienation emerges and is transformed by forces and conditions that arise within historically contingent modes of production.

Modes of Production

Capitalistic expansion into the Western Hemisphere had been occurring for over a century by 1600 (Orser 1996; Wolf 1997), and certainly some of the more radiating aspects of that first hundred or so years of expansion impacted the Dis-

mal Swamp region (for example, trade that pushed European commodities to areas Europeans actually had not yet visited, small European expeditions like Hernando de Soto's, some Spanish forays along the Atlantic coast as far north as the Chesapeake Bay, and the settling of a short-lived colony at Roanoke Island). But it was not until Jamestown was settled (1607) that, in retrospect, we can see the subsequent continuous colonial expansion in the region of English political economy and social institutions—its labor systems, its market and commodity production, its methods and ideologies of landscape development, its population explosion, and the general penchant of the British for destroying indigenous American modes of existence and production through warfare, genocide, and land usurpation (see Axtell 1985; Gleach 1997; Hatfield 2004; Parent 2003: 9–54; Zinn 1980). Scholars have long sought to explain and describe the colonial occupation of North America and colonization of its landscape and people through largely cultural terms and frameworks (for example, greed, religious zealotry, contact, acculturation, creolization, and the most recent popular concept, ethnogenesis; see Fennell 2007; Fradkin et al. 2012; Jennings 1976; Todorov 1992; Voss 2008; Weik 2009; Worth 2012). However, when trying to understand this history and later developments, we may find it helpful to think in terms of a series of dynamic and forced articulations of multiple, radically different modes of production (Gallivan 2003; Gallivan et al. 2006; Wolf 1997: 73–100) within and between which such cultural processes as ethnogenesis and creolization occur as direct reflections of the people contributing to such forced, often contradictory, articulations.

It is well known that Karl Marx recognized that the CMP was not the first mode of production that had ever emerged under humanity's wing (Hobsbawm 1989). Rather, Marx identified and even developed a working sense of key constituent aspects of several modes of production that had existed throughout human history up to the time of the CMP, including the primitive or communitarian, the Germanic, the Slavonic, the classical (for example, ancient Greece), the Asiatic, and the Feudal mode of production (Marx 1989, 1998: 33–102). In his work, he variously described and discerned material and social characteristics of past societies centering, in the main, on the organizing principles for exploiting human labor and land, the systemic manners in which surplus foodstuffs were generated, and how the items of daily, utilitarian, and luxuriant use were produced (Hobsbawm 1989). But in some ways, Marx's elaborations on these historical modes of production were relatively limited insofar as he recognized in them, especially the Feudal Mode of Production (Marx 1989, 1998), a means of drawing into clear relief the contingent nature of the CMP—the CMP, while mesmerizing in its complexity, did have an origin in the relatively

recent past and would have a terminus at some future point in time (Marx 1930; Mészáros 1971).

While each mode of production in history constantly changed and transformed, Marx and subsequent Marxists have explored and detailed the structures common to all of them of which we are aware—such as the “means of production”—and that should pertain to those modes of production that we have yet to recognize in the past (Balibar 1997: 209–24; Godelier 1977; Rowlands 1982: 161). As we might expect of a Marxian perspective, how labor was socialized, organized, and exploited are critical, not peripheral, aspects of any mode of production. Additionally, the way the land is exploited, the kinds of technical knowledge that emerge in the service of labor, land, and wealth accrual, the ways in which the material world is exploited, and the various social relations that emerge in connection with all of the above are all very significant in understanding a given mode of production. Finally, ideologies, legal systems and codes of ethics, and the state (in certain modes of production) are crucial dimensions of modes of production in most Marxian analyses (see Trigger 1993).

In contextualizing and establishing the analytical basis for our historical archaeological examination of the Great Dismal Swamp, we must be aware that several modes of production helped germinate and structure the several centuries of social history that are of interest. At certain times, some of these modes of production clashed in contradictory articulation, at other times one mode was dominant, and there were also periods of great ambiguity when one mode was in the chaotic throes of emergence from another mode of production. But we must always remind ourselves that when we speak of modes of production we are speaking of the real world social and economic relations, ideologies, sociocultural traditions, and labor relations that people helped to create, perpetuate, and undermine.

The Capitalist Mode of Production

There is some disagreement among scholars as to when the CMP originated, and these debates need not detain or sidetrack this discussion to any great degree (Clark 1990; Kulikoff 1992; Post 1992; Rothenberg 1985). But laying out the general view of that origin that undergirds this analysis is important. The CMP, and the “capitalistic era” (Marx 1906: 787) more generally, emerged in the late 1400s and early 1500s from the dynamic dialectical contradictions that fueled the demise of the Feudal Mode of Production (which had also emerged and came to dominate England and parts of Europe across several prevenient centuries, circa 1100–1450; see Dobb 1946; Luxemburg 1968; Marx 1906: 787–89, 1998; Sweezy 1950; Wallerstein 1974, 1993: 1–36; Wolf 1997).¹ But when we say

that the CMP “emerged,” that description is intended to denote the fact that at that earliest point in time, it existed in a very nascent or primordial state of historical development (see Balibar 1997: 273–308), slowly rising “from the entrails of the feudal economic order” (Marx, unreferenced quotation, in Balibar 1997: 280; appears also unreferenced in Holstun 1999). The Industrial Revolution and the invention of the cotton gin, much less the automobile and information ages, were to occur much later and represent transformational maturational and intensifying developments within the CMP over hundreds of years. Thus, the CMP has been dynamic, in flux, flexible, and often volatile in its dialectical transformations as it continues to persist across the centuries—and in dialectical fashion, it has likely never fully eliminated other modes of production that it has articulated with over the centuries but rather has incorporated various elements, however transformed, of non-CMP modes (see Luxemburg 1968; Orser 1996).

If the CMP originated in England and parts of Europe, then, we must recognize that it expanded well beyond the bounds of that relatively constricted geography, eventually possessing global dimensions, even by Marx’s time in the mid-nineteenth century (Genovese 1965: 19). The early globalizing growth and expansion of the CMP was made manifest through European (for example, Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England) colonialism and the emergence of private corporations (such as the East India Company) that generated wealth for themselves as well as the monarchical governments that they served. This was the age of primitive accumulation and merchant capital. According to Wolf (1997: 84), the “merchant is a specialist in exchange, buying and selling goods to obtain profit. To increase profits merchants strive to enlarge the sphere of exchange, drawing subsistence or prestige goods produced within [other modes of production around the globe] into channels of commodity exchange, the market.” This process represents the early transformation of goods that are produced with use value into commodities defined in part by their also possessing exchange value (Wolf 1997: 84), as discussed in chapter 2. But it is important to note that the emergence of a class of merchants—those who consistently sought profits through enlarging the domain and extent of the dendritic circuitry of exchange—was crucial in driving early CMP expansion. While true capitalists were absent during this period, merchants might buy surplus goods and foodstuffs from any state and sell at higher prices to another state; they might venture into the domains of the direct producers of goods within other modes of production and trade goods that were “cheap for them yet desirable for the natives” for goods that they could parlay into profits in the CMP market; or they might actively work to expand enslavement, which provided relatively

cheap investment and high output of commodities for the market (Wolf 1997: 86–87). This is the era in which primitive capital accumulated, providing the historical basis for the emergence of mature, industrial and agrarian capital in the later eras of CMP development. Meanwhile, commodities were produced by a variety of means and through a variety of labor arrangements (Innes 1988; Tryon 1917). Enslaved labor—in which the laborer is a captive, legally and customarily owned means of production for enslavers (see Williams 1994: 3–29)—was common enough, while commodity outwork was also very common and saw individuals processing raw materials, such as cotton, into finished goods or products, often from their homes. Indenture was, while similar to enslavement, another distinctive labor management and exploitation system of the era (Campbell 1959; Dublin 1991; Marx 1998: 79–80). In short, labor was distinctively varied in the merchant capital era of the CMP, but at the same time, all labor arrangements worked to channel surpluses and profit to the limited domains of the merchant class and colonial state (Wallerstein 1993: 14–20).

A few characteristic aspects of the shift from mercantile capitalism to mature capitalism include the rise to predominance of wage labor and the development of labor-power as a commodity, the stark division of land into agrarian producing areas and industrial areas and the division of laborers into lumpenproletariat and the industrial proletariat (Marx 1998: 81–82),² the emergence of capitalists, the dominance of movable capital (commodities), and the dominance of money in market exchanges. I have also discussed how the most excessive and saturating material forms and dimensions of alienation developed under the mature CMP, as did the phenomena of commodity fetishism and charismata. But with CMP reliance on wage labor, we see clearly how the CMP existed in contradiction to the mature mode of production that relied predominantly on a racialized enslaved laboring caste, what I call the Capitalistic Enslavement Mode of Production, a term I coined and preliminarily developed elsewhere (Sayers 2012a).

The Capitalistic Enslavement Mode of Production

There has been some very heady and heated debate among Marxist and Marx-influenced scholars over the years as to whether the enslavement system of the modern world constituted its own mode of production, whether it was a productive arm or auxiliary system of the CMP or a peculiar political-economic region within a global capitalist system (Mintz 1985: 55–61; Wallerstein 1993: 202–21). I will provide, briefly, a few representative views from scholarship. Eugene Genovese, one of the great commentators on this issue, saw enslavement systems in the United States and the Western Hemisphere as having been their own distinct mode of production. According to Genovese (1974: 44), “Slavery